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ABSTRACT

As part of a pilot study of the nutritional status of Mexican American preschool children attending Head Start in East Los Angeles in the spring of 1969, questions were asked concerning their families' buying and food practices. This paper reports on the information obtained from the 21 questionnaires which were returned. Answers to the following questions are discussed: (1) parents' place of birth; (2) size of the families and age of the family members; (3) parents' employment and income; (4) range of food costs per person; (5) families using food stamps; (6) how often, where, and by whom the shopping was done; (7) what influenced their food purchases; (8) types and quantities of food bought; and (9) the type of milk used and where it was bought. The pilot study indicated that these families on a very limited budget provide diets for their preschool children which are adequate in most nutrients. (NQ)

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Food Buying Practices of Mexican Americans in East Los Angeles

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The only published study of Mexican Americans that included food purchasing patterns was made of migrant workers but to date, no study of urban Mexican Americans' food buying habits has been published.

In the spring of 1969, a pilot study of the nutritional status of Mexican American preschool children who attended Head Start in East Los Angeles was made and, as part of the study, questions were asked concerning buying and food practices. Twentyone questionaires were returned with questions about buying practices answered.

Nutrient intakes, biochemical findings, food frequency and meal patterns have been reported elsewhere.

Eight of the 21 mothers or 38% reported they were born in Mexico. Of the 12 mothers born in the U.S., 9 were born in California and of these, seven in Los Angeles County. Nine or 43% of the fathers were born in Mexico. Nine or 43% of the fathers were born in the U.S. and of these, 7 were born in California. Three were born in Los Angeles County. In eight families both parents were born in the U.S. and in eight, both were born outside the U.S. Four families reported living in the U.S. four or less years. Length of residency for the other 13 individuals born outside the U.S. was 1-20 years with a median of 7 years.

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The mean size of the families was 5.8 and the median was 6 members with a range of 3-13 individuals per household. Seventeen families (81%) reported fathers in the home. The median age of fathers was 32 years and of mothers 26 years. The ages of the children ranged from 1-7 years and the median was 5 years.

Sixteen of the 17 fathers were employed and two mothers, one being employed half-time. Both mothers were in families where fathers were employed. In five families out of the 21 reporting, or 24%, no one was employed. Five families (24%) were receiving welfare, of which four families were American born. Three families (14%) received Aid to Families with Dependent Children.

The largest number of the families reporting, nine (43%) had incomes between $75-100 per week with six families (29%) having incomes of $50-75 per week. The mean weekly income of U.S. born fathers was $89 while that of Mexican born fathers was $76. The median per capita income was in the $500-1000 range. The mean weekly per capita income was $12.

The range of food costs per person per week reported was $2-8 with a mean of $5 and a median of $4.50, considerably less than the $6 plus per week for a low cost USDA diet in 1969.

The percent of income spent for food ranged from 11 to 70% with a mean of 37% and a median of 35%.

Only four families reported using food stamps. Two families said they were ineligible, four did not know about the program, two could not afford the stamps, and one had no transportation to get the stamps. Seven did not give a reason for answering "no" to this question and one family did not answer this question.

The majority of the families answering reported that they did their food shopping weekly, that is, 12 familes, or 57%. Five families (24%) reported they did the food shopping monthly and two (10%) reported shopping daily.

Fourteen of the 21 families reported they did their major shopping in supermarkets. Two used chain stores exclusively and seven used local stores exclusively. Three quarters of the families supplemented their weekly shopping at local stores.

Eight families reported doing their major shopping on weekends, six on weekdays, and six in the evenings.

In eleven families (52%) the mother did the shopping, in seven families (33%) the father and mother together, and in two families, the father, mother, and children together. One family reported the father did the shopping.

In answer to the question whether they shopped from a list 14 families, or 67%, reported using a list. Of these eleven (57%) used a written list and three a mental list. Fourteen (67%) reported they planned meals, and five said they did not. When asked if this planning was mental or written all 14 said mental.

When asked to check what influenced their food purchases 15 families out of the 21 answering, or 71%, said store specials with 12 (57%) indicating family requests and 10 (48%) season. Only four families (19%) indicated that advertisements influenced their shopping. Culture was indicated as a factor by six (29%) of these urban families. Friends and relatives had little influence on food purchases and Head Start had none, they reported.

Of the six families (29%) reporting culture as a factor, both parents were born in Mexico in three families, both were born in the U.S. in two, and in one family they were born in some other locality.

When buying meats, poultry, and fish, 13 out of 19 families (74%) answering reported that cost was important while 11(58%) said the amount of fat. Most indicated several factors were important. Color was important to 8 families, odor to 7, familiarity with product for seven, bones for four, and government grade for four.

When buying canned fruits and vegetables, the three most frequently mentioned factors were size of can, price of can, and freedom from dents and rust were mentioned 13, 11, and 15 times respectively by the 19 families answering. Brand name was important to eight families and unit price to four.

Brand name and price per package were the two factors mentioned most often by the 16 answering the question concerning important factors when they purchased frozen foods. Six mentioned that the frozen state was important.

Grade was the most important factor mentioned when buying eggs.

Families in general did not buy staples in the largest quantities available. Dried beans, sugar, flour, and corn meal were bought by the majority in 5 lb. lots while rice, cereal, lard, and pastas were bought in 1 lb. lots. Twelve families indicated size of package was important and 11 out of 20 families indicated unit cost as important.

Thirteen families (62%) reported they did not use convenience foods such as TV dinners or instant mashed potatoes while 7 (33%)

reported using them. Three families indicated using TV dinners, 3 instant mashed potatoes, and one soups. The frequency that these were used was not ascertained.

In answer to a question about the type of milk used 20 out of 21 families indicated using pasteurized whole milk. Eleven families used pasteurized whole milk exclusively. One family used only evaporated milk. Nine families (42%) used more than one kind of milk, five using two kinds, 3 used 3 kinds, and one family used 4 kinds. Six families (29%) had milk delivered while 11 (52%) purchased it at the market and one purchased it at a dairy drive-in. Two purchased milk both at the market and a dairy drive-in.

Twenty-one families (80%) reported having refrigerators and all but one (5%) said the freezer compartment was in working order. Five families (24%) reported not enough storage space for non-refrigerated foods.

Fourteen families out of 20 (70%) reported never eating out as a family, 13 (65%) that no individual ate meals out and 7 (35%) that no money was spent on snacks eaten out.

Biochemical and nutrient intake data reported at another time indicated that the preschool children in these families had sufficient intakes of protein, riboflavin, calcium, and vitamin A. Plasma ascorbic acid levels were good or excellent for all and riboflavin excretion and thiamine excretion were satisfactory except for one whose excretion of thiamine was low. Iron intakes were low for 47% of the preschoolers.

The fact that these families spend even less for food than the low cost USDA budget and the fact that the diets of their

preschoolers contained sufficient protein and dairy products is evidence that they shop wisely.

One fifth did not know about the food stamp program. Nutrition educators and social workers need to be sure that people know who are eligible.

Difference in cost of milk delivered at home or bought at the market should be stressed but it should also be realized by nutrition educators that if refrigerator space is limited, families are large, and shopping is done once a week, milk may have to be procured either by home delivery or from a local market. If nutrition educators advise these families to use nonfat milk and dried skim milk they must also at the same time emphesize the need for increasing the sources of vitamin A in their diets to compensate for that not gotten from whole milk. Diets of these Mexican American preschoolers were low in green leafy and yellow vegetables and plasma levels of other preschool Mexican American children have been found frequently to be low in vitamin A.

The consumer advisor should remember at all times that these people have limited storage space. Moreover, an additional outlay in money is needed to buy in bulk. When one third or more of the family income is spent for food instead of one fifth as for the average American family, extra money can not be invested in food that is not eaten immediately.

Our pilot study indicates that these families on a very limited budget provide diets for their preschool children that are adequate in most nutrients.